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# The Fabulations of Grey Owl

by Peter Unwin

Between the wars, he was the most famous Red Indian in the world. He lectured to kings and commoners. His books about native life in Canada flew off the shelf. He was a star of the growing nature conservation movement. But the man everyone knew as Grey Owl was leading a very double – and very troubled – life. Now, as Hollywood prepares to bring Grey Owl's story to the big screen, Peter Unwin examines the complexity and contradictions of the Indian who wasn't.

Grey Owl was born Archibald Stansfeld Belaney at Hastings, England, September 18, 1888, the first of two sons to Katherine (Kitty) Cox and George Stansfeld Belaney. Abandoned by her husband, Kitty moved to London to remarry, leaving four-year-old Archie in care of his grandmother Belaney and two aunts. He attended Hastings Grammar School, where he was reportedly a good student with an affinity for music. But he was also a loner and a dreamer, and became fascinated at an early age with North American Indians. After leaving school, he worked briefly in an office in Hastings, but the lure of the New World was too much for him. At age seventeen he boarded a boat at Liverpool bound for Canada, returning to England only for war service and, after he was famous, for lecture tours. He never acknowledged his Hastings beginnings.

**T**he transformation of Archie Belaney into an Apache half-breed is one of the most remarkable stories in Canadian history. It is the story of a man who, for a brief time, spanned the two great solitudes of North America. He was both immigrant and native. He *went* native—not by accident—but on purpose, knowing it was essential for his survival. He was at the same time civilized and “savage,” European and non-European. In the course of this extraordinary balancing act, he became something that never existed before.

Although the world would come to call him Grey Owl, he was born Archibald Stansfeld Furnage into a very complicated family. His father, an alcoholic womanizer, big-game hunter, and bankrupted tea-taster, squandered the family's fortune, impregnated a fifteen-year-old girl, and disappeared. He later surfaced, supposedly married to an Elizabeth Cox, and sailed for Florida with her and her young sister to engage in a disastrous real estate speculation. He abandoned Cox, pregnant, in Florida, and returned to England married to her fifteen-year-old sister, who was also pregnant.

The child of that pregnancy was born September 18, 1888, at Hastings. It is doubtful the infant ever saw his father, who showed up intoxicated in Brandon, Manitoba, and was later murdered in a drunken brawl in the United States.

Taken from his child-mother by two maiden aunts, he was given the family name of Belaney. As a boy, he played constantly at “Red Indian,” built a wigwam in an English garden, and claimed he could get within two inches of a bird and not be seen. At thirteen, to impress a girl, he demonstrated an Indian war dance and fed frogs to his pet snake. He saw his first Indian in 1903 when Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show performed in Hastings. He left school at sixteen, worked in a lumberyard, and spent his weekends throwing knives. One afternoon he attempted to topple a statue onto his aunt as she read the newspaper. Later he lowered a homemade bomb down the



PHOTO BY PIERRE L. BERTIN, PARIS



chimney of his employer's factory. On March 29, 1906, eighteen-year-old Archie Belaney boarded the SS *Canada* bound for Halifax.

Three months later he squatted in a canoe in the Temagami district of Ontario, northeast of Sudbury. Taken on as a chore boy at a local inn, he carried a notebook to jot down Indian words. In 1907 he returned to England to scrounge funds. His footwear now consisted only of moccasins. Friends described him walking the streets of Hastings "with the loping gait of an Indian." While there he learned of his father's death in America.

By summer's end he was back as chore boy at the Temagami Inn. With his father out of the way, he gave himself a new history, growing up an Indian in the American Southwest, son of a Scottish trader and full-blooded Apache girl. In broken Ojibwa, sign language, and a few words of English, he romanced an Indian girl, Angele, and through her befriended Ned White Bear, who wore an alarm clock under his shirt. He mastered more than two hundred words of Ojibwa and learned to put the verb before the noun. About this time he was given the name *ko-home-see* (little owl) by one of Angele's uncles who called him, "the little owl who sits taking in everything."

On August 23, 1910, he married Angele in a civil ceremony in a fire ranger's hall on Bear Island. A local Ojibway played violin. He later told his wife, teasingly, that he would make a white woman of her. "No, Archie," she said. "I make Indian of you." (Forty years later Angele explained to a reporter: "Maybe he not always tell the truth. But he a good man, my man.")

In 1911 he fathered a child. The girl's baptismal certificate provides the first documentary proof of Archie's existence in Canada, recording his name as Arthur Belenge. Emulating the father he never met, he abandoned Angele and his infant daughter. In 1912 he walked from Temagami to Toronto, a distance of five hundred kilometres. The same year he made his first appearance in the village of Biscotasing, 130 kilometres northwest of Sudbury on the Canadian Pacific Railway line. Employed as a fire ranger, he received monthly cheques from his aunts, mailed small sums to Angele, but never included a note.

In 1912 Biscotasing was a village of summering Indians, French-Canadian timbermen, and Scots and English traders. An Ojibwa minister gave sermons to the village's white Protestants. Here Archie Belaney established himself as "a white man with possibly a streak of Indian in him." His skin was dark from the sun, and he kept his long hair out of his eyes by two loops of fishing line. By now he was telling people his father died violently while employed as a Texas Ranger. He himself, he said, fought the Yaqui Indians in Mexico.

At his rooming house in Biscotasing, he met Marie Girard, a young Métis woman who spoke fluent French, English, and Ojibwa and had never spent a day in school. He invited her to join him on his trapline. Meanwhile, he continued to modify his family history: his father, the Texas Ranger, was now murdered by a Mexican who, in turn, was killed by Archie. In a masterstroke, he claimed to have been a young member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, through which he met his father's sisters, who raised him for a time "near London." This helped explain his curious English accent. By now he was drinking heavily and writing on sheets of foolscap. In 1914, after returning from the Goulais River country north of Sault Ste. Marie, he got drunk and demolished his rooming house. Before he could be arrested, he escaped into the bush with Marie Girard, who was pregnant with his child.



In the 1930s, the world's view of North America's aboriginal peoples owed much to romantic fiction and Hollywood central casting. Grey Owl, whose early notions came from reading books about cowboys and Indians in his room in Hastings, England, happily dressed in buckskins and braids—or full feathered headdress if the situation required—to validate his claim of Indian blood. In England, after his second book *Pilgrims of the Wild* was published, he was a sensation.

**Contained in his love of the wild was a potent anger toward people.**

The next verifiable sighting of Archie Belaney occurred May 6, 1915, half a continent away at Digby, Nova Scotia, where he enlisted in the Canadian Army. He gave his birthplace as Montreal, his marital status as single, and claimed previous military experience in the Twenty-eighth Mexican Dragoons. In 1915, stationed in England, he went AWOL to visit his aunts. Unknown to him, Marie Girard had given birth to his son and died soon after of tuberculosis. Joined to the Thirteenth Battalion of the Royal Highlanders, Belaney saw action in France as a sniper. A fellow soldier noticed him "squirm up muddy hills in a way no white man could."

In January, 1916 he took a bullet to the wrist and was hospitalized for two weeks. In April, a bullet smashed his right foot, and for the rest of his life he would be unable to walk properly. In 1917, at the London General Hospital, his fourth metatarsus and

fourth toe were removed. There he met and later corresponded with a young nurse. "He spoke English very badly," she said. "His spelling was simply awful. No educated Englishman could spell so badly."

It now appears that Archie Belaney was attempting to translate ten thousand years of native oral tradition into literary narrative:

Gee Im lucky to be able to travel the big woods agen. 'Fo us peple the woods and the big hills and the Northern lights and the sun-sets are all alive and we live with these things and live in the spir-it of the woods like no white person can do. ... I wonder if all this means anything to you I hope you wont laugh at it anyway.

The limping twenty-five-year-old was laying down the "pidgin Injun" dialect that Hollywood talkies would soon eagerly emulate. He was also taking the first tentative stabs at an indigenous literary form, free of European sophistication and American muscle, hinting at an honesty that would make him, briefly, one of the most popular writers and lecturers in the English-speaking world.

While convalescing in Hastings, Archie reintroduced himself to a childhood sweetheart, Ivy Holmes, now twenty-six. In February 1917, at Hollington Church-in-the-Wood, he married her. According to the unsuspecting young bride, "he had a way of making the back-woods sound very attractive."

Things did not go well for Archie Belaney following his discharge from the army. Back in Biscotasing he learned Marie Girard was dead, and that he now had a second child, a son. The boy, Johnny, was raised by his former rooming-house landlady, Edith Langevin, a Cree midwife said to have delivered every child in Biscotasing. The boy cuttingly referred to his father as Archie Baloney. Having kept his British wife waiting for nearly two years, he confessed his marriage to Angele. She promptly divorced him as a bigamist. Archie drank hard again, and was seen stirring his homemade mash with a canoe paddle. He got drunk on shoe polish.

Still an excellent canoeist, he found a job as a deputy ranger on the Mississauga Forest Reserve in 1920. There he composed his first public statement as a conservationist, copied it on a piece of birch-bark, and nailed it to a tree: GOD MADE THIS COUNTRY FOR THE TREES—DON'T BURN IT UP AND MAKE IT LOOK LIKE HELL. He rejected the theory of evolution on the grounds that, "monkeys didn't drink, beat up their wives, and leave." During this time he got to know a little girl named Libby who would later call him "one of the nicest things that happened to me when I was growing up." For a number of years he was befriended by an Ojibwa family, the Espaniels, to whom he attributed "calm & quiet contentment, little intimate enjoyments" and "the appreciation of the woods in its fullest sense." Later he would inscribe a book to Mr. Espaniel: "To one whom I am proud to call Dad."

Across a campfire in Biscotasing before the war, he once asked a University of Toronto student, "Do you think I can write?" Now he was filling his knapsacks with notes and writing stories. He walked compulsively through the bush at night to avoid what he called "the abyss of introspection." He recognized he had become, in his own words, "a human distillery." He began to dye his hair black and redden his skin with henna. Reportedly, he rolled a spoon back and forth across his nose to flatten it. He invented a war

Though populations thrive across Canada today, the beaver, the animal most closely associated with Grey Owl's conservation work, was close to extinction earlier in the century. Ironically, Grey Owl trapped animals for most of his first twenty years in Canada, but under the influence of his Iroquois wife Anahareo, who disliked trapping, he became an advocate for animal protection. After magazine articles and short films amplified his message, the federal government invited him in 1930 to reestablish beaver colonies in Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park. He later transferred to Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan, which became his last home.



PRINCE ALBERT NATIONAL PARK



dance, probably from readings in Longfellow and James Fenimore Cooper. He sang Indian war songs that neither the Cree nor Ojibwa understood. He beat on a war drum made from a cheese box. With a warrant out for his arrest for "unlawfully conducting himself in a disorderly manner while drunk at the Biscotasing Railway Station," he fled to Temagami where in 1925 he worked as a guide while living with his former wife Angele. Within a year they had a second daughter together. But in the fall he left. Their first daughter, Agnes, now fourteen, saw him off at the train station. He told her: "I go away. I will come back sometime. I like travel." She never saw him again.

Concerned about the near extinction of the beaver, the Ontario government banned non-Indians from fur trapping in 1925. Despite his henna and war dances, Archie Belaney was *not* an Indian, so he moved to northern Quebec to maintain his livelihood. In 1926 he enclosed a photograph in a letter to his Hastings aunts. "This is my wife Gertie, an Iroquois chief's daughter, twenty-one-years old." He had met the girl as a nineteen-year-old waitress at a camp. He was smitten by her, and she in turn would write two books about him as "Anahareo," the name that Archie would later give her. (He also tenderly called her "Insect.") In the summer of 1926, an Indian chief pronounced them man and wife. She worked a trapline with him, but killing animals sickened her, which resolved in Archie a belief that the death of the beaver meant the death of the woods.

In 1928 the two moved near the New Brunswick border to Cabano, Quebec, taking with them two pet beavers. There Archie Belaney set his traps for the last time. With no income except a small military pension, he homesteaded in a squatter's shack with the hope of establishing a beaver colony. Having little else to do, he wrote an essay in praise of the white trapper, published by the British magazine *Country Life*, which requested a book. By 1930 he had developed a taste for vanilla extract and wore a bottle of it on a string around his neck. It was reported to a priest that he drank turpen-

tine. At the village of Métis-sur-Mer he was reduced to selling ten-cent admissions to see his pet beaver. In the same village he delivered his first lecture on wilderness at a tourist hotel. It was well received and earned him fifteen dollars. He became known as the "beaver man," and was approached by local scout-masters wanting him to teach lessons on bush craft.

His relationship to his pet beavers not only contributed to his eventual status as a world famous lecturer, it also transformed him from a mediocre trapper into a committed conservationist with a genuine feeling for wildlife. The zoo he called the "saddest place in any city," and he let people know it. Contained in his love of the wild was a potent anger toward people. "Man," he claimed, was "the parasite supreme of all the earth." He believed the wilderness was "a living, breathing reality with a soul" and that all living things in the forest had a right to live. He not only believed this, he went public with it. At a time when the forestry branch of the Canadian government seriously considered killing wolves by sewing the forest floor with strychnine pellets dropped from aircraft, he trumpeted a message that the world had never heard before.

Very quickly a nascent conservation movement converged around Archie Belaney. Parks board officials made a short film about him. Then he was invited to Montreal to address the Canadian Forestry Association national convention. Following the lecture, he was approached by an elderly gentleman who shook his hand and said tellingly, "I don't know whether I have just heard a poem or an encyclopedia on wildlife." The next day a Montreal paper ran the



headline FULL BLOODED INDIAN GIVES LECTURE ON WILDLIFE. His wife Anahareo later noted that the more he wrote, the more Indian he became in the eyes of the public. In 1931, the most visible symbol of wilderness protection in Canada, he was offered the post of caretaker at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba and given the opportunity to successfully establish a beaver colony. The next year, he and Anahareo moved to Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan and lived in a small shack with an active beaver lodge in the living room. That summer, Anahareo gave birth to a daughter.

Meanwhile, in 1931, his first book, *Men of the Last Frontier*, was published in England under the name Grey Owl. The original manuscript showed the teeth marks of a beaver that tried to make a bed out of it. According to the *Times Literary Supplement*, it was "difficult to recall any record of the Great North so brilliantly and lovingly handled."

"Grey Owl is no stuffed Indian," said the *New York Times*. A year later the book appeared in Canadian school readers. Only one critic argued it must have been ghostwritten, since "no half breed trapper could pick up such an elegant style."

Eager to sell American rights to his books, he told Scribners editor Max Perkins, "I am an American myself and proud of it." His second book, *Pilgrims of the Wild*, sold fifty thousand copies in the U.K. alone. At Perkins' request he wrote a children's book, *The Adventures of Sajo and Her Beaver People*, since translated into eighteen languages. The prose, softly humorous, excels in his characteristic personification of animals: "I am afraid that their table manners were not very nice, as there was a good deal of rather loud smacking of lips and hard breathing to be heard, and they often talked with their mouths full." He also displays a full respect for the linguistic capabilities of children. Of young Sajo's heavers he writes:

"The larger one of the two was called Chilawee, or Big Small, and the not-so-large one was called Chikane, or Little Small. Unfortunately they did not grow evenly; that is, one would grow a little faster than the other for a while, and then he would slack down and the other would catch up, and get ahead of him. First one was bigger than the other, then the other was bigger than the one! And it would be discovered that Little Small had been Big Small for quite some time, whilst Big Small had been going around disguised as Little Small ... It was all very confusing and Sajo had just about decided to give them one name between them and call them just 'The Smalls.'"

In 1935 he undertook a gruelling British tour, lecturing three and four times a day to crowds so large that police were called in to control them. "I am Grey



GLENN ARCHIVES, NABAB 200

Beaver Lodge, Grey Owl's home, reflected in the waters of Ajawaan Lake in Prince Albert National Park. The home was constructed with a hole in the lakeside wall so beaver could enter the cabin directly from the lake. Beaver Lodge was also Grey Owl's last home; he died there in 1938. A few people had always known the truth about his identity, but remained silent until his death. The furor that followed after Grey Owl was exposed as an Englishman in native costume neutralized his conservation message for a generation. But in the 1930s, at a time of depressed economy and unsettled politics, Grey Owl's message of compassion toward living things was refreshing and optimistic.



Owl," he would begin. "I come from across the seas to tell you about my Canadian homeland." He was called the best writer on animals "in any language," and his books sold at the rate of two thousand a week. His British publisher, Lovat Dickson, a Canadian, wrote his biography, and for the next forty years refused to believe the man was anything but a Mexican-born half-Apache.

After four months and some three hundred lecture dates, he sailed for home. On board he drank heavily, ate only onions, and was noticeably ill, but off the Halifax shore he resumed regular meals and began work on *Tales of An Empty Cabin*. He was vilified by the press in Toronto for making an unflattering comment about the value of organized religion to the Indian, but in Ottawa he had dinner with the prime minister and was photographed by Karsh. Back in Prince Albert, his wife attempted to strangle him and then fled for California. By now his health was so broken, he could barely carry a pail of water. Despite that, he made it to Montreal where he

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married a woman named Yvonne Perrier, inexplicably signing his name Archie McNeil. There is no doubt Archie could be a determined suitor when he wanted to. (In the early days of his romance with Anahareo, he wrote her a letter spanning 104 pages.) But on the train back to Prince Albert, the bride watched her husband drink himself to sleep. In Prince Albert he was too weak to carry a pack.

Abruptly he sailed with his wife to England, where he gave a private lecture to the Royal Family at Buckingham Palace and started another British tour, though he'd barely survived the first one. He travelled 6,900 kilometres, gave 130 lectures, and was seen swallowing white pills by the handful. When it was over, the BBC refused to broadcast his farewell speech—it contained a reference criticizing fox hunting. Bitterly disap-

pointed over this—and sick—he boarded the SS *Berengaria* for North America where he spent the next three months touring the U.S. and Canada, living on raw eggs and whisky. Finally, he returned to his cabin in Prince Albert and died there April 13, 1938, two months short of his fiftieth birthday.

In his brief life, Archie Belaney came to embody the great distances of his adopted country. By boat, by train, by canoe, by foot, by snowshoe, he was constantly moving. From the city to the bush, and back again, across the ocean and back again. He was always on the move, always searching for a native place in which to live, and to hide. Europeans were fascinated with the "Red Indian," but Belaney was not content to be fascinated. He attempted to *become*. Eventually he became the most famous Red Indian in the world. Even his speech, we are told, revealed "the true nasal twang of the Canadian Indian." He became the blue-eyed Indian the world wanted—not like the ones he once met hunched over stacks of law books in Osgoode Hall, memorizing the British North America Act—but on stage, whooping it up in a war dance and petting a beaver, the animal he once slaughtered and then almost single-handedly saved from extinction. He insisted the true custodians of the wilderness were Indians. He met kings and prime ministers, and begged them to put Indians in charge of the forest. According to John Diefenbaker he was the greatest conservationist that this nation has ever produced. "Like all great men," said Diefenbaker, "he had his warts."

As a child Archie Belaney knew that a secret waited for him in the forests of Canada. He came in search of it and in his own lifetime saw much of the forest disappear for good. He became the world's leading spokesman of the "calm and silent presence of the trees ... the trust and confidence of small animals. ... Without that," he wrote, "I am nothing." He saw the dams and the strip mines ripping into the land that he came to love. He wrote and worked himself to death in passionate devotion to keep that land alive. "I will stand on my head," he told Anahareo, "if it will make people listen." In attempting to start a new life, Archie Belaney dramatically rejected the old one—the world of Europe hell-bound for war and suffocated by machines and tyranny. Call me Grey Owl, he said. Archibald was a "high-sounding pretentious, cake-eating epithet, just Grey Owl, please."

Today, in some photographs, he looks slightly pathetic in full Indian headdress bought from a souvenir shop in London, England. His face is gaunt. He looks gravely ill. But in other pictures, entertaining an Ojibway boy confined to the Peterborough Hospital or paddling a canoe on a wild river, he appears triumphant, a smile of pure contentment on his handsome face. In these moments, he is the most successful impostor, the man who in all honesty told a reporter, "I'm just a round peg in a round hole." ■

Peter Unwin is a Toronto writer with a special interest in the North and the Canadian frontier. His book, *The Rock Farmers*, is published by Cormorant Books.